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MFA FINAL VISUAL PRESENTATION  
BY  
C. CAITLIN WELLS  
A THESIS  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN  
PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

IN  
PRINTMAKING  
DEPARTMENT OF ART AND DESIGN

EDMONTON, ALBERTA  
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WAITING ROOM

Submitted by C. Caitlin Wells in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.



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YEAR THIS DEGREE WAS GRANTED: 2008

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14 hours 47 minutes	2008	mixed media	33" x 45"
VALUE: \$500.00			



## Waiting Room

*"Some say it is best not to go near the center of time. Life is a vessel of sadness, but it is noble to live life, and without time there is no life. Others disagree. They would rather have an eternity of contentment, even if that eternity were fixed and frozen, like a butterfly mounted in a case."*

-Alan Lightman, *Einstein's Dreams*

Change is something we have in common with all beings, human and otherwise. People of different ages, races, and cultures may be aware of time in different ways, but whether a person measures time by the changing of the seasons or by the relentless movement of the second hand on a watch, the passage of time is evident in changes occurring in us and around us. In my experience, we are predominantly concerned with time as a method of organizing and coordinating our activities, but occasionally we experience something that gives us a brief flash of insight into a larger sense of time; something that brings us into contact with an knowledge of the impermanence of ourselves and of everything. We may come to see that the only thing that exists and endures is change itself.

This understanding of the transient nature of life is itself transient, slippery and overwhelming, and for me it is too unwieldy to confront continuously. But it permeates my artistic practice, asking me to respond to the reality of impermanence. My earlier work focused on collecting and drawing desiccated organic objects in order to preserve evidence of the passage of time in images that, because of their contemplative nature, might inspire the viewer to engage in slowed moments of their own. My current work continues these practices and goals, but also takes a step back to look at the motivations behind such an activity. The drawings and videos expose the paradoxical reactions to my awareness of transience: I want to record the passage of time in some preservable format, to pin down a few moments against time's ungraspable rush. But the awareness of impermanence also leads to the realization that in order to truly live our lives, we must be attentive to each moment as it occurs, rather than dwelling on past moments or losing ourselves in anticipation of our future experiences.

To address our attempts to negotiate and reconcile these conflicting impulses, I want to develop a simple and direct working process that would embody the ways in which we perceive, try to understand, and record the passage of time. I approach this exploration of time and change with a kind of pseudo-scientific method. The visual variables are limited – ink, paper, and human response – in order to draw attention to the subtle nuances of the visual elements in each work. All the drawings and videos contain the characteristic behaviour of Chinese ink as a moment-by-moment marker of time's passage, coupled with various forms of visual response to this unfolding of time. These responses include time-lapse video recording of the activity of the ink, and capturing the original state of the ink-object through casting and observational drawing, variously suggesting acts of measurement, preservation, interpretation, and attention. The ink makes a record of



its own transformation while it becomes a new form of itself, and this new form is preserved in the surface of the panel. These notations occur against the backdrop of multivalent printed grids. With their rhythmic sequence of compartmentalized moments, the grids are connected to the rigid systems of calendars and clocks we use to measure time, but are also a manifestation of millimeter-by-millimeter attention, and can thus be seen to reflect moment-by-moment awareness of change.

Having been greatly moved by William Kentridge's time-lapse works, I was especially interested in his use of video as drawing, and in the succinct ability of his process to document changes. In my drawings and videos, we are able to view the activity of the ink in a way that would not be accessible otherwise; the particular interactions of the ink and paper in the drawings reveal the character of the ink still in the course of *drying*, rather than already *dried*. My time-lapse video works distill hours into moments and compare a series of transformations which would otherwise be imperceptible, reflecting our subjective experience of past, present and future time. My approach to this work has also been also influenced by the philosophy and practices of John Cage, especially his print works. Other chronologically disparate but philosophically related sources of inspiration include *memento mori* and *vanitas* still life paintings of western art practice, the clear and direct *Hakubyo* or "white drawings" and Zen ink paintings of Japanese art traditions, as well as the simplicity of Andy Goldsworthy's transient sculptures. I connect this body of work to the current resurgence of drawing as a medium of interest, especially to the process-reliant yet simple practices of contemporary artists including Anna Barriball and Ronald Flexner.

I believe that the concerns behind my thesis 'Waiting Room' are relevant beyond the realm of visual art. As time progresses, human discoveries continue to lead to great beauty, and to connect the global population ever more intricately. But our progress has also increased our pace of life exponentially over the last century, jeopardizing our abilities to have the kind of contemplative experience that allows that fleeting but crucial sense of connectedness to the world and the people with whom we share it. On an individual level, my art practice allows me to literally collect time as a personal calendar of my days. As a member of the global population it reminds me that the same force that brings love also brings the end of love, that growth is the other side of decay, and that as I suffer and feel joy, so does every other person. A real awareness of our shared temporal condition is vital if we are to have meaningful success in contending with the current environmental and social situations; I think that this awareness is also necessary to fully enjoy and appreciate what we have.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Waiting Room Slide List

1. ***4 hours 51 minutes***  
Mixed media, 2008  
33" x 45"
2. ***4 hours 7 minutes***  
Mixed media, 2008  
40" x 60"
3. ***14 hours 47 minutes***  
Mixed media, 2008  
33" x 45"
4. ***2 hours 55 minutes***  
Mixed media, 2008  
33" x 45"
5. ***8 hours 48 minutes***  
Mixed media, 2008  
33" x 45"
6. ***7 hours 16 minutes***  
Mixed media, 2008  
33" x 45"
7. ***10 hours 2 minutes***  
Mixed media, 2008  
33" x 45"
8. Gallery view of panels
9. Gallery view of panels and video projections
10. ***3 hours 43 minutes (143 hours) and 7 hours 16 minutes (143 hours)***  
Video projections, 2008  
57" x 75" each
11. ***19 hours 57 minutes (143 hours)***  
Video installation, 2008  
22" x 47" x 32"
12. ***19 hours 57 minutes (143 hours) - detail***  
Video installation, 2008  
22" x 47" x 32"



## ARTS

### WAITING ROOM

#### MFA PRINTMAKING GRAD CAITLIN WELLS SETS THE CLOCK IN WAITING ROOM

MARY CHRISTA O'KEEFE / [marychrista@vueweekly.com](mailto:marychrista@vueweekly.com)

The smartest people in the world don't have a handle on time. It's linked with the intimate stuff of nature, the most fundamental components of the universe, but we're not yet sure exactly what it is, or why it appears to travel in only one direction. We're still pursuing the radical revisit of reality opened up by 20th century physics to the very bottom of its rabbit hole, redefining force and matter and its ultimate implications. Our still-young century may unveil the structure and substance of the "t" in our equations, and deepen our acquaintance with our cosmos.

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Printmaking, Waiting Room, is an  
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# waiting room

Caitlin Wells MFA Printmaking  
August 5 to 30, 2008

Graduate of the University of Alberta  
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Printmaking

OPENING RECEPTION

Thursday, August 7

7 – 10 pm

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Friday: 10 am – 5 pm

Saturday: 2 – 5 pm

*Closed Sunday, Monday & Statutory Holidays*



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## ARTS

### WAITING ROOM

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The smartest people in the world don't have a handle on time. It's linked with the intimate stuff of nature, the most fundamental components of the universe, but we're not yet sure exactly what it is, or why it appears to travel in only one direction. We're still pursuing the radical redefinition of reality opened up by 20th century physics to the very bottom of its rabbit hole, redefining force and matter and its ultimate implications. Our still-young century may unveil the structure and substance of the "t" in our equations, and deepen our acquaintance with our cosmos.

It's almost shocking something so mundane and inate to us, woven deep into our biology, remains a mystery to our intellects. We 'feel' time in 'ties' or 'drags,' and some of us are taken by something equally unexplainable 'before our time'—these and many other colloquial expressions testify to the undertow of the clock beneath the clatter of our daily lives, its identity bound in our own.

So at once, we have an emotional and biological understanding of this phenomenon without total physical revelation. And sometimes, we touch both at the same time—the complete knowing of time simultaneous to its other mystery, the fleeting immortal moments that lie at the heart of creativity, sex and psychedelic and religious experience—the elating and humbling discovery of being human in the midst of this much more fantastic and incomprehensibly sprawling event playing out on scales that are surreal, thrilling and often scary to contemplate.

Caitlin Wells' graduate show for her MFA Printmaking, *Waiting Room*, is an illustration of the relationship art can have with the biggest of big questions: that as we examine the essential nature of reality and our role in it as conscious and perceptual beings, there are avenues of discussion that are exponential and aesthetic. Wells asserts the value of having art at the table simply through the pertinence, persistence, and beauty of her investigations.

"I was trying to draw together paradoxical responses to time and the way we perceive it," Wells explains. "There's an experience people have—this flash of insight into a larger sense of time. I came across a photo of myself at 11 and



"I realized it felt not so long ago. I was overcome by the transience of me—or everyone—and wondered if that would persist. Would I come to the end of my life and feel the same way? Or would moments become much longer, the way it does when you watch snowfall? Observational drawing does that for me. It expands the moment, and the drawing becomes a holder of that time as well."

Observational drawing had been part of Wells' practice from her undergrad days—her piece in a recent drawing show at the AGA was a video take on it: time-lapse footage of avocado skins—but as she worked with her ideas, she was dissatisfied with the decay inevitably invoked by a straightforward link to the organic, and sought to decouple it from the process, examining change over moments in a purer context.

"There are two conflicting responses to transience: one is to hold on to time and preserve it, hold it still. The other is immersive, being 'in the moment.' I don't have one answer, but the questioning is part of this work—it's about both, trying to preserve evidence of time and trying to create moment-by-moment awareness," Wells emphasizes.

Her ideas crystallized into the abstracted body of work that became *Waiting Room*, uniting several strands of her investigation: observational drawing, pseudo-scientific chronographic markmaking and an entrapment of process captured through print and video and altered by her passive and active aesthetic responses.

Wells' show is as contradictory as the impulses she's pursuing. Her prints and video/projection installations are delicate and forceful, spare and complex, enigmatic and coherent. Besides the deepest of abiding mysteries, Wells also captures the most fleeting: these pieces, especially her moving images, are mesmerizing in their beauty. The artist delivers moments back to the viewer, letting them choose whether to let them linger or flicker—letting them control, for an instant measured only through their perception, time. V

*Until Sun, Aug 30*  
**Waiting Room**  
*MFA Printmaking Show by Caitlin Wells*  
*FAB Gallery (87 Ave & 112 St)*



Review on Prairie Artsters , August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2008

<http://prairieartsters.blogspot.com/2008/08/review-of-caitlin-wells-mfa-exhibition.html>

MONDAY, AUGUST 18, 2008 (Prairie Artsters)

## Review of Caitlin Wells MFA exhibition: Waiting Room REVIEW BY MANDY ESPEZEL

Caitlin Wells' MFA exhibition from the University of Alberta's printmaking department is a collection of seven mixed media wall mounted images, and three video pieces; two of which are projections, the other a horizontal series of four small screens. In the first seven works, Wells builds up images using a combination of grids, intersecting lines and fluctuating ink stains. The videos are time elapsed documentation of ink tablets dissolving and absorbing into paper, streaming in forward and reverse sequence. The show as a whole operates as an implied conversation between structure and chaos.

Both mediums serve as visual representations for the larger ideas that Wells mentions in her statement for the show. She talks about how the transient nature of life informs the work. Visual art is used as a tool for understanding and communication. In Wells' lexicon, graphs become symbolic of the ordered world, where we document change in order to decipher the events around us. Time can be represented in a consistent and unified manner; broken down into an easily recognizable format. The ink stains function as signifier for the un-ordered and individual, an abstract and unpredictable component that cannot be totally controlled. By combining these elements, Wells works to reconcile the incongruent.

The physical wall pieces make use of some very fundamental and well controlled visual essentials. There is the structural base of the grid representing a system of measurement and control. On top of this float the intricate ink forms, shifting in tone and density. In some of the pieces, interweaving lines bind around the ink-figures, connecting them to one another, exchanging information. Wells complicates these images by varying the surface qualities. One element may be extremely glossy, one matte, co-existing in the same atmosphere. There are also some surprising components of physicality, where



pieces of clear or black material protrude off the canvas one or two inches thick. The graph paper is used to depict an environment that both balances and contrasts with the ambiguous shapes of the ink stains. The components are structurally minimalistic, but Wells assembles her chosen forms of mark making into complete and challenging images.

She uses the same basic visual elements in the videos, but the process of ink staining and drying becomes the central focus. One projection shows a tablet of white substance dissolving into a stream of liquid that creeps over a black surface, and then is shown being sucked back into the tablet in reverse. The second projection is similar, but features a black tablet on white paper. Instead of a stream, the black ink feathers out all around the central source. When played in reverse, the stain peels back over the paper fibres with reluctance. The four smaller screens document this wetting and spreading process as well. Instead of being projected onto the wall however, you look down on these screens, as though observing some ongoing experiment. The graph paper re-appears in these videos, adding to that quality of investigation.

At the start of Wells' artist statement, she has a quote from Alan Lightman's novel *Einstein's Dreams*. Lightman spoke at the Arts and Science Symposium back in November of 07 as a part of the Cultural Capital of Canada programming, and his ideas about how we interact, and about the relationship between Art and Science have clearly influenced Wells' practice. There is a visual emphasis on balance in these drawings, and the repetition/reversal of the videos encourages concentrated observation. There is also an intensity that exists within this subtlety. The embracement of specific visual cues allows for absolute dedication to there signified meaning. The reason the graph paper is successful as both a formal element and as conceptual representation, is that Wells believes totally in the power of that representation. Her ink stains provide contrast and tonal complexity, but they also function figuratively, evoking loneliness, or frustration, or humour. The opportunity to read into these pictures is endless because of the place they strive to inhabit: between the literal and the representational.





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